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WHAT IS THE PROBLEM? A TAXONOMY OF LIFE PROBLEMS AND THEIR RELATION TO SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING IN MIDDLE AND LATE ADULTHOOD

(Accepted 26 September 2005)

ABSTRACT. Research on subjective well-being has focused mainly on positive values and goals. This article studies the structure and content of life problems from a theory of personal meaning as well as the relation of these problems to subjective well-being. Data from the German Aging Survey, a representative sample of German citizens (40–85 year; $n = 2844$) were used. A content analysis of life problems was carried out as expressed on a sentence completion instrument which elicits descriptions of self and life. Although outweighed by positive sentence completions, a substantial part of the sentence completions had a negative tone. Problems in life could be reliably coded as cognitive, motivational, or affective problems on specific and global levels. They were found in a large number of life domains, such as self, health, social relations, and society at large. Specific and global problems in each of the three components showed independent and differentiated contributions to subjective well-being. These findings stress the relevance of studying life problems.

KEY WORDS: elderly, life problems, middle-age, subjective well-being

INTRODUCTION

In understanding how individuals may reach high levels of subjective well-being researchers have mainly focused on values and goals (Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 1999; Schmuck and Sheldon, 2001). For

The German Aging Survey was carried out at the Centre for Psychogerontology at the Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands (Director: Prof. Dr. F. Dittmann-Kohli), and the Research Group on Aging and the Life Course at the Free University of Berlin, Germany (Director: Prof. Dr. M. Kohli). It was sponsored by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth. Data collection was accomplished by Infas-Sozialforschung, Bonn, Germany.

example, it has been argued from a lifespan perspective that individuals actively reconstruct their values and goals to maintain subjective well-being in view of a more negative balance between losses and gains with age (Baltes and Carstensen, 1996; Brandtstädter and Rothermund, 2002). Relatively few studies have considered how individual perceptions of problems in life may obstruct this process. In this article, we argue that understanding human beings and their efforts to maintain high levels of subjective well-being also requires research on whatever blocks and frustrates this process.

We conceptualize problems in life from a theory on personal meaning. In the first section we summarize research on personal meaning and derive a theoretical taxonomy of problems which individuals might encounter in their life. In the second section we argue how such problems may be related to reduced well-being. In our empirical research we use a representative sample of German adults of 40 years and older (the German Aging Survey; Dittmann-Kohli et al., 2001) to study the cognitions representing life problems from an individual's own perspective. We will also empirically study how these life problems are related to subjective well-being.

Life Problems from a Perspective on Meaning Construction

Researchers have distinguished different components and dimensions with regard to personal meaning. A first distinction is that between a cognitive, motivational and affective component (Battista and Almond, 1973; Baumeister, 1991; Dittmann-Kohli, 1995; Reker and Wong, 1988). The *cognitive component* refers to a coherent and comprehensive framework which individuals use to interpret their personal experiences and evaluate them in a positive way. The *motivational component* encompasses one's anticipations on future life, one's goals, wishes and plans, as well as the perception of one's possibilities for realizing them. The *affective component* refers to happiness and fulfilment and the avoidance of negative emotional states. Together, these components are important in achieving a sense of personal meaning in life.

O'Connor and Chamberlain (1996) found the three components invariably represented in subjects' accounts of their sources of meaning. Van Selm and Dittmann-Kohli (1998) found evidence for the existence of these components in accounts of meaninglessness.

Although it is widely agreed that the components are somehow interrelated, the exact nature of these relations is disputed (Reker and Wong, 1988; Klinger, 1998; Van Ransst and Marcoen, 2000). Considering their theoretically assumed different functions, it can be argued that they each represent a set of different aspects of personal meaning.

Besides the three component model Reker and Wong (1988) have argued that “a proper understanding of personal meaning requires both a bottom-up (elemental) view and a top-down (holistic) view of life” (p. 221). In order to distinguish different levels of meaning, we will make use of the concepts specific versus global meaning (Park and Folkman, 1997; Westerhof et al., 2001). The *specific level* refers to meanings attached to concrete situations, roles, persons or events. The *global level* encompasses more basic beliefs, orientations and trait-like emotional states. This distinction between global and specific levels mirrors the theoretical distinction between global and domain-specific aspects of well-being (Campbell et al., 1976; Diener et al., 1999). As in a bottom-up approach, specific levels of meaning are often presented as the constituting agents of a global sense of meaning in life (Reker and Wong, 1988; Park and Folkman, 1997). On the other hand, in a top-down approach, global levels of meaning may serve as broad, integrative structures from which individuals construe the meaning of specific situations and events (Baumeister, 1991).

This formulation of the pursuit of meaning in life allows us to conceptualise different life problems. They can be characterized as belonging to the cognitive component, such as the incomprehensibility of experiences, difficulties in life, one's own weaknesses, or regrets about the past; to the motivational component, such as fears, negative future expectations, a lack of purpose in life, or the perception of obstacles for realizing one's goals; or to the affective component such as the presence of negative emotions or the absence of positive emotions. Within each component, problems may be on the global level, such as incomprehensibility of life in general, an overall lack of purpose or a generalized negative emotional state. Alternatively, they may be on the specific level, for example referring to particular difficulties, fears or passing negative emotional states. We therefore expect a 3×2-fold structure of life problems from a perspective on personal meaning. With regard to the structure of life

problems we expect that this theoretical taxonomy is found in cognitions about self and life. As there are few systematic studies on life problems, it is difficult to add expectations about the qualitative nature of problems within this taxonomy. Our study therefore explores the problems which are found in these cognitions using a qualitative methodology.

Life Problems and Subjective Well-being

The literature on subjective well-being suggests that a variety of aspects of one's objective life circumstances are related to subjective well-being. However, the subjective interpretation of the objective circumstances is even more important in enhancing or maintaining well-being (Diener et al., 1999). Since we study life problems as subjective interpretations of personal and environmental factors and aspects of past, present and future self and life, it can be expected that they will be related to an impoverished subjective well-being. Perceptions of life problems should therefore add to the explanation of subjective well-being beyond one's objective life circumstances. Furthermore, problems on a global level should add to the explanation of subjective well-being above the level of specific problems, because they have an overarching integrating function and serve as a general orientation to life. They are therefore considered more serious than specific life problems and should reduce subjective well-being, even when controlled for objective life circumstances and specific problems.

The picture might even be more complex, because subjective well-being is a multi-dimensional rather than a uni-dimensional construct. Diener et al. (1999) emphasize the need to study subjective well-being as consisting of three components: life satisfaction as a cognitive component and pleasant and unpleasant affect as emotional components of well-being. These components have proven to be related, but clearly separable dimensions. With regard to the three components of challenges to meaning in life, we expect that cognitive problems are most strongly related to lower levels of life satisfaction and affective problems to high levels of unpleasant and low levels of pleasant affect. Motivational problems will be somewhere in-between. Deficits in goal realization may mildly increase negative feelings, prohibit positive feelings and result in somewhat more negative judgments about life as a whole.

Methodological Remarks

In this article we study life problems in a representative sample of German adults of 40 years and older. The second half of life is an excellent territory, given the fact that the balance between gains and losses becomes more negative with age (Baltes and Carstensen, 1996). Furthermore, elderly have to deal with ageist stereotypes and behaviours (Westerhof and Barrett, 2005). Therefore, midlife and beyond is a challenging period from the viewpoint of life problems and their relation to well-being.

We use a semi-structured sentence completion instrument to elicit descriptions of oneself and one's life (the SELE-instrument, an acronym of the German SElbst and LEben, i.e., self and life; Dittmann-Kohli and Westerhof, 1997; Westerhof et al., 2001). This allows respondents to express the various problems which they encounter in their own words. We use a theory-driven approach to classify the different problems which individuals express into the theoretical taxonomy. A data-driven approach is used to derive the content of the different life problems. Scores will be derived from the sentence completion questionnaire which represent the three components on specific and global levels of life problems. These scores will be analysed in relation to subjective well-being in order to answer the second research question. In this way the sentence completion instrument is well-suited to qualitative as well as quantitative analyses of cognitions about self and life in large-scale survey research.

METHOD

Sample

In the German Aging Survey independently living persons between 40 and 85 years were interviewed in 1996 (Dittmann-Kohli et al., 2001). The sample consisted of randomly chosen individuals from the population registers of 290 cities in the Federal Republic of Germany. It was stratified by age group (40–54; 55–69; 70–85 years), sex and residence in the former Federal Republic of Germany and German Democratic Republic. Fifty percent of those contacted ($n=9613$) were willing to participate ($n=4838$). The response rates

were 63%, 56% and 40% in the respective age groups. The final sample contains an overrepresentation of healthy people in the oldest age group (age 70–85). Respondents were additionally asked to fill out a questionnaire with well-being scales which was collected later by the interviewer. Slightly more than 4000 respondents (4034) returned the questionnaire, a return rate of 83%. Respondents who returned the questionnaire did not significantly differ from respondents who did not.

Instruments

The SELE sentence completion questionnaire consists of 28 sentence stems that elicit descriptions of self and life which are relevant to the respondent (Dittmann-Kohli and Westerhof, 1997). There are about equal numbers of positively, negatively, or neutrally worded sentence stems. They prompt descriptions of self and life (e.g. “I am proud that...”, “My weaknesses are...”, “When I think about myself...”) and future anticipations (e.g. “I intend to...”, “I fear that...”, “In the next few years...”). Subjects were asked to finish the sentence stems so as to describe what they consider to be true and important about themselves. The SELE was administered at the beginning of the interview, to avoid interference with topics that were covered in the interview.

A hierarchical coding scheme was developed for this study to categorize the sentence completions, building on previous work (Dittmann-Kohli, 1995; Van Selm and Dittmann-Kohli, 1998). The first step categorizes answers about self and life as negative, neutral, or positive. All negative answers are seen as problems in life. The second step categorizes all problems in the three components: cognitive, motivational, and affective. The third step categorizes the components into specific and global levels. Besides these structural aspects of life problems which were deductively derived from theories on personal meaning, the fourth step contains a number of inductively derived categories (see Table I). Interrater reliability was good. For evaluative quality (negative, neutral, positive) κ was 0.91. For the three components, Cohen's κ was 0.74. For categories within each component κ was 0.88. For the content of the categories, κ was 0.83. Previous research has shown that the number of problems mentioned in the SELE is related to

TABLE I

Examples of meanings problems and percentage subjects that expressed them
(n = 2844)

Meaning category	%	Example
Cognitive Component		
<i>Specific level</i>		
Negative Self	86.3	My weaknesses are...impatience
Negative Interpersonal	25.6	I think that I... am easily deceived
Negative World/Humanity	68.7	It annoys me... our politicians
Negative Current Life	70.6	It's difficult for me... that I'm ill
Negative Past Life	35.0	When I look at my past life, I regret...not having children
<i>Global level</i>		
Negative Self	10.7	When I think about myself... I can't stand myself
Negative Current Life	12.8	In comparison to others... my life is worse
Negative Past Life	7.9	It's difficult for me... to think about the past
Motivational Component		
<i>Specific level</i>		
Goal Realization Problems	10.6	It annoys me... that I still haven't got a full-time job
Barriers to meaning	58.5	I would like to...do everything, but I am no longer physically able
Negative Future	82.7	I fear that... I will get a serious disease
Negative Existential	57.0	I fear that... death
<i>Global level</i>		
Motivational Deficits	23.4	I intend to ... nothing
Goal Realization Problems	7.9	What's been bothering me recently is... whether I can reach all my goals

TABLE I

Continued

Meaning category	%	Example
Negative Future	26.1	I fear that ...I won't be happy
<i>Affective Component</i>		
<i>Specific level</i>		
Negative Affect	22.0	I have noticed that I... feel lonely
Absence of Positive Affect	3.1	Compared to the past... not happy
Physical Distress	19.3	My body... hurts (lower back pain)
<i>Global level</i>		
Negative Affect	25.6	I often feel ... miserable
Absence of Positive Affect	9.8	I feel really good... never
Physical Distress	22.5	I often feel... very tired

measures of meaning in life and depression (Van Selm and Dittmann-Kohli, 1998).

The SELE-instrument was coded and analysed for a random sample of 2844 respondents. On the level of the specific and global problems in the three components six variables were computed for each individual as the number of sentence completions falling within a particular category. On the level of content of life problems, a dichotomous variable was computed for each problem, indicating whether an individual mentioned the category at least once across the SELE-instrument or not.

Subjective well-being data were gathered with the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS, Pavot and Diener, 1993) and the Positive And Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS, Watson et al., 1988). All scales showed good psychometric properties in the German Aging Survey (Dittmann-Kohli et al., 2001).

Control variables included in the analyses refer to age, gender, region of living (East- or West-Germany), income (net monthly household income in 14 categories), educational level (highest educational attainment), marital status (married or not), and health (no, slight and considerable hindrance due to health problems according to the respondent).

RESULTS

Taxonomy of Life Problems

Our first research question concerned the structure and content of life problems as expressed by individuals in the second half of life. We expected that the theoretical structure of three components on two levels is found in individual accounts of self and life. Furthermore, we wanted to explore the content of life problems.

All sentence completions were coded as positive, neutral, or negative. On average respondents had 10.6 negative sentence completions out of 28 in total ($SD=3.2$). To assess whether the theoretical structure of life problems could be found, these negative sentence completions were coded as cognitive, motivational, and affective problems and within each of these components on a specific or global level. As the number of sentence stems eliciting different components varies, one should be careful in comparing the means for the different components. However, our objective was not to study the frequency with which problems are mentioned, but whether they would fit the taxonomy outlined in the introduction.

We found that people expressed life problems within the cognitive ($M=5.5$, $SD=2.3$), motivational ($M=4.0$, $SD=1.9$) and affective component ($M=1.1$, $SD=1.0$). Furthermore, we also found specific ($M=8.9$; $SD=2.6$) as well as global problems ($M=1.8$; $SD=1.5$). Specific problems were found 12.5 times more often than global problems in the cognitive component, almost 4 times more often in the motivational component and about equally often in the affective component. The finding that answers could be reliably coded in the three components on specific and global levels and that substantial numbers of sentence completions fall in all categories is a first indication that the theoretical taxonomy can be recognized in the cognitions of self and life of our respondents.

To answer the question on the content of life problems, the sentence completions were further categorized into particular types of specific and global problems within the components. Table I shows the distribution of these problems. We will give a qualitative overview of their content below.

The *cognitive component* contained both specific and global evaluations of self and life. Specific meanings in the cognitive component

were related to a wide range of themes: self, interpersonal concerns, the world in general, as well as particular aspects of current and past life. The category Specific Negative Self-Evaluations contained different forms of self-criticism: interpersonal behaviour (e.g., having difficulties saying no), discipline (e.g., being impatient), personality traits (e.g., stubbornness), and criticism of one's own deeds or choices in the past (e.g., having chosen the wrong occupation). In the Negative Interpersonal Domain three types of problems were most prevalent: being treated unfairly (e.g., being deceived), being left alone or excluded, and missing contacts or persons. The category Negative World encompassed problems which were directed to the macro-level of society: German politics (e.g., the economic situation and mass-unemployment), worries about the world (e.g., fear of war) as well as behaviour of politicians and people in general (e.g., loss of morals, egoism). The category Current Life contained concerns about physical health, occupation (e.g., unemployment, work stress), as well as housing conditions and the living environment. The category Past Life comprised negative life-events (e.g., death of a close person, World War II) as well as regrets (e.g., about education attained). On the global level, Negative Self-Evaluations could be characterized in general as low self-esteem. Negative Life-Evaluations were further divided into evaluations of current and past life.

Specific problems within the *motivational component* were related to the realization of specific goals, barriers in the attainment of goals as well as negative anticipations of specific events in the future and existential problems. Goal Realization Problems were identified as doubts whether a specific plan or goal could be realized (e.g., finding a job) and as a lack of control over the realization of a goal (e.g., due to socio-economic circumstances). The category Barriers comprised particular obstacles towards realizing plans and goals: health barriers, lack of time left to live, lack of time in everyday life, lack of freedom, and lack of money. Negative Future Anticipations were most often related to illness and disease and becoming dependent, but also to financial problems, job loss or unexpected life-events. In the category Existential Conditions we found answers regarding the process of aging, being alone, death and dying as well as difficulties in coping with existential conditions (e.g., "It's difficult for me... to live alone").

On the global level we found three categories within the motivational component: Motivational Deficits, Goal Realization Problems and Negative Future Anticipations. Motivational Deficits indicated that there was a lack of motivational stimuli in the subject's life: Subjects expressed a lack of plans or goals, feelings of uselessness or boredom and in the most dramatic case a lack of the desire to live. Global Goal Realization Problems referred to the totality of one's plans and goals and Global Negative Future referred to a negative outlook on life and self in general.

Within the *affective component* emotions and affects were coded as specific when they had state-like properties and as global when they had trait-like properties in the descriptions of the subjects. Five categories of Negative Affect were found: agitation, depression, anxiety, stress and loneliness. Absence of Positive Affect was expressed in terms of not being happy, not feeling well, or being dissatisfied. Physical Distress was reported frequently, especially feeling tired or exhausted, feeling ill or suffering from physical ailments.

Relations to Subjective Well-being

The second research question concerned the relation of life problems with subjective well-being. It was expected that both specific and general problems additionally predict subjective well-being beyond objective life circumstances and that the different components to which problems belonged are related in different ways to measures of subjective well-being.

In a three step multiple regression analysis on each of the three well-being variables, we first entered a set of context variables (age, gender, former East- or West-Germany, income, educational level, marital status, and health restrictions). In a second step we entered the composite scores for specific life problems in each of the three components, and in a third step we entered a set of scores for global life problems in each of the components (Table II).

For all three well-being variables, the added explained variance for both the specific as well as the global life problems was highly significant ($p < 0.001$). In each analysis, entering life problems at the global level resulted in a somewhat larger increase of explained variance, even though they were entered in the equation after problems at the specific level. The β weights of the variables for

TABLE II

Three-step regression analysis of subjective well-being on (1) life contexts, (2) specific problems, and (3) global problems (n = 2406)^a

	Step 1 β	Step 2 β	Step 3 β
<i>Life Satisfaction</i>			
Age	0.230***	0.201***	0.178***
Gender	0.095***	0.095***	0.088***
Living in GDR	-0.127***	-0.089***	-0.084***
Income	0.158***	0.154***	0.121***
Education	0.031	0.038	0.024
Married	0.211***	0.210***	0.178***
Health impairment	-0.203***	-0.140***	-0.086***
Cognitive specific		-0.229***	-0.226***
Motivational specific		-0.130***	-0.123***
Affective specific		-0.091***	-0.056**
Cognitive global			-0.168***
Motivational global			-0.129***
Affective global			-0.108***
R^2 adj.	0.137	0.198	0.263
<i>Positive Affects</i>			
Age	-0.108***	-0.115***	-0.136***
Gender	0.053*	0.063**	0.060**
Living in GDR	-0.041	-0.024	-0.020
Income	0.105***	0.100***	0.073***
Education	0.125***	0.122***	0.110***
Married	0.071**	0.065**	0.037
Health impairment	-0.188***	-0.149***	-0.101***
Cognitive specific		-0.057**	-0.055**
Motivational specific		-0.114***	-0.104***
Affective specific		-0.090***	-0.058**
Cognitive global			-0.107***
Motivational global			-0.111***
Affective global			-0.134***
R^2 adj.	0.125	0.145	0.191
<i>Negative Affects</i>			
Age	-0.268***	-0.242***	-0.222***
Gender	0.125***	0.118***	0.119***
Living in GDR	-0.042	-0.070**	-0.072***
Income	-0.050*	-0.048*	-0.024
Education	-0.020	-0.022	-0.011
Married	-0.040	-0.037	-0.013
Health impairment	0.130***	0.076***	0.035
Cognitive specific		0.151***	0.149***
Motivational specific		0.098***	0.085***

TABLE II
Continued

	Step 1 β	Step 2 β	Step 3 β
Affective specific		0.140***	0.110***
Cognitive global			0.096***
Motivational global			0.077***
Affective global			0.133***
R^2 adj.	0.083	0.124	0.160

^a All added explained variance significant at the $p < 0.001$ level.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

specific cognitive and motivational problems did not change much, when the global level variables were entered. The effects of specific affective problems appeared to be moderated somewhat by the measures of problems at the global level. These findings support the hypothesis that specific life problems add to the explanation of well-being beyond life contexts and that problems on a global level independently add to the explanation beyond life contexts and specific problems.

In the final model, it is found that all six variables representing the specific and global meanings within the three components had a significant impact on all three subjective well-being variables. Comparing the relation of the six variables with life satisfaction, we found that specific and global cognitive problems are related strongest to this dimension of well-being, followed by global and specific motivational problems. Affective problems are related less strong to life satisfaction. Global affective problems are related strongest to positive affects, but specific affective problems are not strongly related to positive affects. Cognitive and motivational problems are equally related to positive affect. Global and specific affective problems are among the three strongest predictors of negative affect (together with specific cognitive problems). Motivational problems have the weakest relation with negative affect. In general this pattern of findings supports our hypotheses concerning the relation between the components and different dimensions of well-being, but most clearly for the relation between the cognitive component and life satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

Research on subjective well-being has focused mainly on processes of goal realization as mediating life circumstances and individual levels of well-being. Little is known about problems which individuals might experience and which may be related to an impoverished level of well-being. Our research questions concerned the structure and content of life problems from a perspective of personal meaning as well as their relation with subjective well-being.

Taxonomy of Life Problems

It was found that life problems represent a substantial part of the cognitions of self and life of most individuals. The theoretical taxonomy which was outlined in the introduction could be found in our empirical study. Moreover, the 3×2 -fold structure is validated by the analyses of subjective well-being. The components at the specific and global level all showed a unique contribution to subjective well-being, which supports the assumption that they function autonomously in decreasing subjective well-being.

The number of problems which were expressed at the specific level is much larger than those on a global level. This might be related to the nature of the sentence stems. However, in two other studies based on the German Aging Survey, we found a much greater proportion of global meanings among positive than among negative sentence completions (Hover, 2000; Westerhof et al., 2001). Obviously, individuals struggle to keep their global meanings positive. This is an important finding, because positive meaning on a global level might be accompanied by life problems on a general level. For example, we found that although there are no age differences in life satisfaction, individuals of different ages mentioned different types of life problems (Westerhof et al., 2003; Read et al., 2005).

With regard to the content of life problems, a large number of concerns were found. Besides problems at the global level, a number of problems in specific domains were expressed: self, physical functioning, social relations, occupation, time, finances, housing, society, and existential themes. Part of these domains is also found in research on values and goals as well as on domain-specific evaluations of

subjective well-being. Yet, our findings suggest that the content of life problems is different from the content of life values and goals (Ryff and Essex, 1991; Westerhof et al., 2001). For example, the self was often found as a source of specific problems, whereas global negative self-evaluations were relatively sparse. Self-construal processes may be typified by a strong urge towards obtaining and maintaining an overall positive self-concept. However, we find that this self-enhancement is combined with considerable criticism on specific aspects of the self. Another example concerns political conditions. These played an especially important role in the specific negative evaluations of current life, whereas another study showed that they are almost absent in positive evaluations (Dittmann-Kohli et al., 2001). It is important to realize that when this study was carried out, Germany was in the middle of the process of unification between East- and West-Germany. Consequences of unification appear to be at the basis of many personal problems.

Subjective Well-being

The composite scores demonstrated by and large the expected relation to subjective well-being. This further validates our theoretical assumptions about the structure of life problems. Problems at the specific and global level both contribute to the explanation of well-being beyond life contexts. The stronger relation of the latter may be caused by the overlap in content which exists between global problems and well-being questionnaires which ask for global judgments. Methodological confounding is minimized, because the measurements took place at different times. Furthermore, the SELE asks for spontaneous statements: Negative feelings, for example, may be present as measured with the PANAS, but they need not to be of a high concern and therefore they don't need to be mentioned in the descriptions of self and life. Hence, the finding that negative meaning at the global level demonstrates stronger correlations with well-being variables than problems at the specific level may be attributed to their presumed greater psychological significance.

The three components were found to be related to life satisfaction, positive, and negative affect in different ways. These findings do not only show the validity of the composite scores of life problems. They also suggest that affect is differentially related to the life problems

within the cognitive and motivational component. Problems with regard to the cognitive component primarily increase negative affect, whereas those with regard to the motivational component primarily decrease positive affect. A cross-sectional design cannot be conclusive on this point, yet this dynamic would make sense theoretically. First, it fits evidence that pleasant and unpleasant affect appear to be related but clearly separable factors (Watson et al., 1988; Lucas et al., 1996), and empirical findings that purpose-in-life is more strongly related to positive than negative affect (Ryff, 1989; Zika and Chamberlain, 1992). Second, this interpretation corresponds to the functions of the motivational and cognitive components that are described in theories on personal meaning. The motivational component mobilizes a person and brings along interest and enthusiasm. Furthermore actions taken in the process of realizing goals are accompanied by pride and excitement. Motivational deficits therefore should primarily decrease the experience of positive affect. Problems within the cognitive component have a great significance in the appraisal and understanding of oneself and one's life. They are often related to an underlying set of painful experiences. These negative accounts might have an affective impact on negative emotions, such as distress, nervousness, shame, or guilt. Given the fact that the tendency to interpret reality positively has been well documented, we propose that the cognitive component has a special function in neutralizing or avoiding negative affect within the broader framework of personal meaning.

From the Negative to the Positive

Research on personal meaning has often pointed out that people are able to find meaning even in apparently meaningless circumstances. Several cognitive mechanisms which serve to neutralize life problems are described in the psychological literature, such as defence mechanisms, coping, cognitive restructuring, lowering aspirations and downward comparison. At least two strategies emerge from our research. Our findings point to a cognitive strategy which can be described as shifting the level of meaning (Baumeister, 1991; Westerhof et al., 2001). By staying at lower-level meanings, a person can avoid having to draw negative conclusions about life as a whole. For example, soldiers engaged in battle stick to basic levels of meaning

and concentrate on technical details and instrumental questions in order to avoid higher level meanings concerning the consequences of their actions, such as killing other men (who leave families behind) and causing thousands of citizens to abandon their homes. On the other hand, positive judgments of one's life in general might neutralize the impact of specific negative life events and conditions, since they have the power to transcend them. For example, Dittmann-Kohli (1995) describes how elderly often state that they are "satisfied" with their current life, despite unfavourable conditions.

Another strategy might be called converting problems into goals. Negative evaluations of certain conditions are often found in combination with personal goals about these conditions. Subjects often expressed plans to change an undesirable situation (e.g. "I would like to... find a better place to live") or self-definition (e.g. "I intend to... become more tolerant"). The problem is transformed into positive meaning by the intention to change the situation. Life problems therefore play an important role in motivation, as they provide the individual with a framework for setting goals and finding purpose.

The focus on life problems may therefore in the end be important to understand how individuals deal with difficulties and are able to restore their sense of well-being. Furthermore, our study shows that perceptions of life problems are related to subjective well-being in a discernable pattern. Dealing with these problems in an adequate way helps individuals to adapt to the changing realities over the life-course and maintain their well-being.

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